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ABSTRACT

The social condition known as postmodernity has an impact upon education in that it creates global marketplaces, increased marginalization of more workers, and privatization of institutions, including educational institutions. The postmodern culture revolves around the excesses of marketing and consumption and the social relations of postindustrial capitalism. In this world, "fast capitalism" requires workers to be adaptive and proactive to change and to become "partners" in a competitive business that regards knowledge as a product to be owned rather than power to be shared. The implication of this culture for education is that learners must learn how to learn and to solve problems. The postmodern culture, however, asks that learners not question this paradigm. In this scenario, education is regarded as a means of producing more productive workers, whereas questions of how education can improve the lives of the disadvantaged are ignored. Practical guidelines to a more socially critical approach to education should include the following: trying to change social relationships, asking questions about the socially just nature of educational experiences, looking at the familiar differently, and seeing teaching as a form of critical intellectual struggle. The development of educational guidelines and practices for the future should include the following: (1) develop a shared understanding of the "new culture" among all participants; (2) allow more time and more flexible work organizations to allow participants to discuss and negotiate the content, pedagogy and evaluation of their own learning; (3) build opportunities for critical reflection, analysis, and action into educational programs for all participants, including teachers; (4) understand the political configurations of education; and (5) include personal biographies of learners in the shared learning that students and teachers bring to school in order to promote a shared understanding of the social construction of reality. (Contains 19 references.) (KC)

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# POST MODERNITY AND CONTINUING EDUCATION: BECOMING CRITICAL LEARNERS

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## Introduction

I am very pleased to be here today for this important conference on post modernity and continuing education. That the social condition known as post modernity impacts upon education seems self-evident - how could it be otherwise? The really interesting question is what are the implications for way we teach and how we learn? In searching for answers conferences such as this one provide an opportunity to grapple not only with the complexities and uncertainties emerging out of post modernity but importantly, how we might respond as individuals and collectively.

In the time available, I want to try and do three things:
i) to offer some critique of the post modern condition;
ii) to unravel the implications for education; and
iii) to point to some useful re-orientations that might guide our work as teachers and learners.

## The post modern condition

Richard Bates (1993) in a thought provoking article titled *Educational Reform: Its Role in the Economic Destruction of Society* argues that the Western world is currently experiencing the economic destruction of society. Education reform in particular is a crucial mechanism in the economic destruction of society whereby the universal interests of society are subordinated to the partial interests of the economy. Bates identifies four aspects of the current international crisis. Firstly, the crisis of third world government insolvency. Secondly, in the first world the excessive speculation in real estate and company takeovers has produced a series of insolvency crises in the financial system. Thirdly, the end of the cold war has brought about a scaling down of the armaments industry. Finally, the political necessity of reintegrating Europe has slowed the German and other European economies.

In Bate's view two fundamental strategies to deal with the crises--plundering the nation state and the application of new technologies--each demands significant reforms in education. In the case of the former, attempts to dismantle the public sector through privatisation and

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marketisation directly impacts upon the education system. In the case of the latter, new technologies in the manufacturing and knowledge management industries both concentrate wealth while simultaneously depressing and marginalising larger fractions of the population (1993, p.1-2).

Like Bates, I believe we need to be more analytical of the forces that are shaping our work as teachers and learners. As a starting point, I want to begin by alluding to the changing set of circumstances described by James Gee as the transition from what he calls "old style" industrial capitalism, which emphasised standardisation, mass production, mass consumption and the tyranny of the production line, to "fast capitalism", where the defining characteristics are competition, quality, and markets centred around change, flexibility, and distinctive niches (Gee, 1994, p.2).

As Gee and Lankshear explain it:

> The 'old capitalism' was based on the mass production of (relatively uniform) goods by large, hierarchically structured corporations serving a commodities-starved, but progressively richer post-Second World War population in the 'developed' world. Workers, hired 'from the neck down', needed only to follow directions and mechanically carry out a rather meaningless piece of a process they did not need to understand as a whole, and certainly did not control (this is the heart of so-called 'Fordism') (Gee & Lankshear, 1995: p.6).

Whereas:

> The new capitalism is based on the design, production, and marketing of 'high quality' goods and services for now saturated markets. In the 'developed' world today economic survival is contingent on selling ever more perfect(ed) and newer 'customised' goods and services to 'niche' markets, that is, to groups of people who come to define and change their identities by the sorts of goods and services they consume. The emphasis now is on the (active) knowledge (and flexible learning) it takes to design, market, perfect, and vary goods and services as 'symbols' of identity, not on the actual product itself as a material good(Gee & Lankshear, 1995: p.6).

Economic activity has now become 'globalised' which means:

* a very high degree of integration and restructuring within and between transnational corporations and global markets;

* a more rapid, and more dramatic, than usual process of structural reorganisation within and between the economies of all capitalist countries; and

* very significant implications for states - particularly at the local level - as changing patterns of

global relationships emerge between transnational capital and local governments (Broomhill, 1995, p.27).

Writers such as David Harvey have observed a number of changes in local labour markets flowing from this transition. These include:

* a growing gap between core and peripheral workers;

* for peripheral workers this means changes in work organisation especially the development of subcontracting, outwork, intensification of women's role in the home, loss of security in the workplace, increase in low skill work, and increased control by employers over the work process;

* overall more authoritarian political regimes are required;

* changes in norms and values - reflecting the emergence of a rampant individualism (Cited in Broomhill, 1995, p.29).

The logic of the global market is that the market and the 'price mechanism' rather than government is the most efficient means for allocating goods and services in the economy. The public interest is best served through the free interplay of individuals competing in the market place(Spoehr, 1995, p.43). The problem, according to Bates, is that such views are deeply destructive of conceptions of education that are "socially and culturally, and even morally constituted"(Bates, 1995, 49).

Peter McLaren (1995) in Critical Pedagogy and Predatory Culture warns that we live in dangerous times. Not only are our public schools under attack, but the very idea of public institutions is increasingly being threatened by the New Right's call for privatisation. He argues that we now live in a predatory culture fashioned mainly and often violently around the excesses of marketing and consumption and the social relations of post-industrial capitalism (post modern society). In the words of McLaren:

> Predatory culture is the great deceiver. It marks the ascendancy of the dehydrated imagination that has lost its capacity to dream otherwise. It is the culture of eroticised victims and decaffeinated revolutionaries. We are all its sons and daughters. The capitalist fear that fuels predatory culture is made to function at the world level through the installation of necessary crises, both monetary and social. Computers have become the new entrepreneurs of history while their users have been reduced to scraps of figurative machinery, partial subjects in the rag-and-bone shop of predatory culture, manichean allegories of "us" against "them", of "self" against "other". The social, the cultural and the human has been subsumed within capital. This is the predatory culture. Have fun (1995, p.2).

Commentators such as Robert Reich make the point that:

> We are living through a transformation that will rearrange the politics and economies of the coming century. There will be no national products or technologies, no national economies, at least as we have come to understand that concept. All that will remain rooted within national borders are the people who comprise the nation. Each nation's primary assets will be its citizen's skills and insights. Each nation's primary political task will be to cope with the centrifugal forces of the global economy which tear at the ties binding citizens together - bestowing ever greater wealth on the most skilled and insightful, while consigning the less skilled to a declining standard of living. As borders become ever more meaningless in economic terms, those citizens best positioned to thrive in the world market are tempted to slip the bonds of national allegiance, and by so doing disengage themselves from their less favoured fellows (Cited in Hargreaves, 1994, p.520).

As Hargreaves noted the post modern social condition is characterised by accelerating change, intense compression of time and space, cultural diversity, technological complexity, national insecurity and scientific uncertainty (1994, p.3). According to him, "post modernity is characterised by technological leaps which make communication instantaneous, distance irrelevant and time one of the most precious commodities on earth" (1994, p.82). It can:

* raise expectations for speed of turnaround which leads to error, ineffectiveness and superficiality;

* multiply innovation, accelerate the pace of change and shorten the timelines for implementation so that people experience intolerable guilt and overload and an inability to meet their goals;

* lead people to concentrate on the aesthetic appearance of change, rather than on the quality and substance of the change;

* exacerbate uncertainty as knowledge is produced, disseminated and overturned at an increasing rate;

* erode opportunities for personal reflection and relaxation, leading to increased stress and loss of contact with one's basic goals and purpose (Hargreaves, 1994, p.82).

Within fast capitalism we have a whole new ethos, orientation, and discourse. According to Gee, workers are turned into multi-skilled partners; trust, co-operation, partnerships and team work become the buzz words as people become committed to the corporate vision/culture/mission. The worker is now a 'partner' and the 'boss' is a leader or 'coach', no longer telling people what to do, but giving them a vision and coaching them on a job that they control, understand, and actively seek to improve (Gee, 1994, p.6). Thus, we arrive at what Gee calls "the enchanted workplace" which is :

> a place full of meaning, support, learning, and collaboration, without much hierarchy and domination, in which everyone proactively takes responsibility, is given the support and "development" they need to succeed, and adds "value" to the enterprise . . . (1994, p.7).

According to Gee and Lankshear:

> Such 'motivated'workers (partners) can no longer be 'ordered' around by 'bosses', they can only be 'developed', 'coached', and 'supported'. Hierarchy is gone, egalitarianism is 'in' (Gee & Lankshear, 1995:7)

The paradox, according to Gee and Lankshear is that:

> 'Enchantment' can mean 'delightful' and, as such, stand for the claims that the new workplace will be more deeply meaningful and fulfilling than the old. But it can also mean 'to be under a spell.' And, indeed, our fast capitalist texts are aware of the tensions between workers who are in control and thinking for themselves and the possibilities that they might question the very ends and goals of fast capitalist business themselves, which would make them very poor fast capitalists indeed. But, then, what sort of 'freedom' and 'empowerment' do workers have if they cannot question the 'vision,' values, ends, and goals of the new work order itself? (1995, p.8)

As Boyett and Conn, in Workplace 2000 point out:

> The contradictions inherent to this emerging ideology of management make it easily vulnerable to abuses of power and the elaborate manipulation of people and values . . . The promise of the enchanted workplace is promise of meaning, with the corporation as the mediator between work and self. In order to cash in on the meanings of the enchanted workplace, however, the workers must cleave to a set of ends - 'superordinate goals', 'corporate culture', whatever - that 'like the basic postulates of a mathematical system', is posited in advance. Workers rarely have the opportunity to influence the content of those ends, let alone play an active role in their formation. . . . As a result, the necessity of allegiance to a set of ends over which one has little control can become a recipe for a dangerous corporate conformity, not genuine participation, but a kind of high touch coercion (Cited in Gee & Lankshear, 1995, pp.8-9).

**What does all of this mean for education?**

As Kenway, Bigum and Fitzclarence have noted this re-direction has effected education at all levels:

> the world of these fast capitalist texts has served, like a magnet, to attract and change the shape of educational debates in the 'developed' world, whether

> these be concerned with vocational and adult education, workplace training and literacy or schools. Just as it is not enough for workers in the new capitalism to simply follow directions, as it was in the old, it is not sufficient (it is argued) for students or workers-as-learners to just 'past tests.' They must develop 'higher order thinking,' 'real understanding,' 'situated expertise,' the ability to 'learn to learn' and to solve problems at the 'edge of their expertise.' These have become the leading motifs in the literature in educationally relevant cognitive science . . . (1995, p.3)

They suggest that such a view transforms the very nature of education:

> Under the influence of market logic, knowledge at all levels of the system becomes redefined as property to be selected and promoted according to its exchange value rather than its use value in various market places. It becomes a thing to be owned rather than shared; competition rather than cooperation becomes the dominant ethic, which benefits the few rather than the many. Further, knowledge production and all associated rewards thus become individualised and again sectional, rather than universal interests are satisfied. The quality of education is placed in jeopardy under such circumstances because in the new educational market place, yield, output, quantity, turnover and ensuring the buyer a credential overshadow educational purposes. Or, to be more specific, educational purposes and the notion of quality are redefined in accordance with the market context. Education is seen less and less as a means towards self-expression and fulfilment or towards the development of cultural and social understanding and responsibility, and aesthetic, critical and creative sensibilities. Its purposes become frankly utilitarian and its quality is defined accordingly (1995, p.37)

Fast capitalism requires new definitions of jobs, new qualities and skills from the future workforce and those who educate them. Reich summarises these needs in the following manner:

> First are the modern problem-solving skills required to put things together in unique ways . . . Next are the skills required to help customers understand their needs and how those needs can best be met by customised products . . . selling and marketing customised products . . . selling and marketing customised products requires having intimate knowledge of a customer's business, where competitive advantage may lie, and how it can be achieved. the key is to identify new problems and possibilities to which the customised product might be applicable. The art of persuasion is replaced by the identification of opportunity. Third are the skills needed to link problem-solvers and problem identifiers. People in such roles must understand enough about specific technologies and markets to see the potential for new products, raise whatever money is necessary to launch the project, and assemble the right problem-solvers and identifiers to carry it out (Cited in Hargreaves, 1994, p.49).

As I think about these changes and the implications for education, I ask whose interests are being served? The heart of the problem as I see it is the manner in which educational discourses come to represent competing interests. Again, Gee and Lankshear's excellent analysis of fast capitalism suggests that meanings associated with fast capitalist texts; terms such as 'empowerment,' 'self-direction,' and 'self-directed learning,' 'partnership,' 'collaboration' and the like refer to very different ideals across different communities. In their view, socially contested words such as democracy, participation and empowerment get caught up with different discourses-different ways of being in the world, different forms of life, different integrations of words, deeds, values, objects signalling different social identities. (1995, p.11)

Let me elaborate from Gee and Lankshear's analysis of self-directed learning. Fast capitalist texts argue the need for 'life-long learning' and the continual need to adapt, change, and learn new skills in our changing times; themes which are common to adult and continuing education. As they explain it, "both current educationally relevant cognitive science and fast capitalist texts stress that learners (students or workers) need to 'learn to learn', 'problem solve', and come to 'real' understanding applicable in new contexts." They need to be "'autonomous' learners, motivated and capable of 'self-directed' learning, not simply waiting to be told what to do, 'follow orders', or 'do school'" (1995, p.13).

Gee and Lankshear explain that in the fast capitalist literature self-directed learning refers to a training design employed on the job 'in which trainees master packages of pre-determined material, at their own pace, without the aid of an instructor'. Here the learner is directing her/himself to acquire skills and content that have been established as important by 'external sources.' These essentials include things such as production schedules and corporate goals. In this scenario, "self-direction seems to be compatible with a good deal of coercion and constrained choice." (1995, p.13) Fast capitalist businesses cannot succeed without workers fully accepting the ends/goals/vision of the organisation.

In contrast, as Gee & Lankshear point out, self-directed learning constructed from a left-liberal discourse of adult education would differ markedly from that of the fast capitalist texts. For instance, Brookfield's work endorses an approach to self-directed learning in which 'critical reflection on the contingent aspects of reality, the exploration of alternative perspectives and meaning systems, and the alteration of personal and social circumstances are all present.' (1995, p.15) The paradox is that fast capitalism wants workers to experience in meaningful ways a sense of "autonomous decision-making, choice, and self-directedness" and at the same time, to make "the 'right decisions/choices' and take 'the right directions' so far as their workplace learning is concerned." (1995, p.14) "Fast capitalists do not, however, want to promote critical reflection in the sense of questioning systems as wholes and in their political relations to other systems." (1995, p.17)

**Becoming critical teachers and learners**

How then, are we supposed to make sense of such contradictions and what can be done? Unfortunately, the answers to these questions are not simple. Let me begin, however, by critiquing the more traditional technical rational approach to education and why it is no longer

adequate. I will then conclude by outlining some of the features of what Smyth calls a "socially critical" view of education which in my opinion offers a more sustainable basis for dialogue about the nature, purpose and content of education (1995a, p.67).

Traditional approaches to education treat knowledge as though it is "objective" and external to the teacher and learner. This form of technical rationality has dominated educational thinking and practices since the publication of Ralph Tyler's book Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction (1949). In this text Tyler asked four fundamental questions: 1) What educational purposes should the school seek to attain? 2) How can learning experiences be selected that are likely to be useful in attaining these objectives? 3) How can learning experiences be organised for effective instruction? 4) How can the effectiveness of learning experiences be evaluated? These questions still form the foundations upon which most teachers' organise and structure their teaching and learning.

This particular orientation assumes that 'good' teaching is mainly a matter of developing better teaching methods and techniques. It emphasises competency-based education, models of management, improved instructional techniques, cooperative learning strategies, systems management approaches to curriculum development and evaluation and behaviorist psychology (Beyer 1987, p.23). According to Bullough and Gitlin, there are a number of shared assumptions informing the 'training' approach to education:

> that learning . . . is primarily a matter of skill mastery, and skills are identifiable in advance by experts and context independent; that teaching is telling or 'delivering' content; that learning is behavioural change; that . . . teachers are knowledge consumers and not producers; that differences in biography or even culture are important in learning to teach only in so far as they enable or inhibit skill acquisition; and that standardised content and criteria are essential to assure program quality and accountability. Speaking generally, these assumptions are fundamentally conservative, emphasising fitting into current institutional patterns and practices rather than thinking about and criticising them (1994, p.70).

The problem with Tyler's scientific management approach is that technical questions such as "What is the best way to learn this given body of knowledge?" prevails over ethical and moral considerations. The focus is upon "mission specificity," "time on task variables" and "feedback obtained to make judgements." Critics such as Giroux believe the traditional approach is "ahistorical, consensus orientated and politically conservative." It is accompanied by top-down social relationships and increased forms of control and accountability. In the words of Giroux, the technical approach "degenerates into a euphemism for a mode of control that imposes rather than cultivates meaning." (1981, p.101)

According to McLaren, the dominant educational culture constrains teachers and students so that they see themselves as consumers rather than producers of knowledge. In contrast, he argues for a critical pedagogy which requires teachers and students to see themselves as creators of knowledge, who ask what should be taught, for what purposes, and how does that knowledge

relate to their lives. McLaren argues that students should be encouraged to:

> critically appropriate knowledge existing outside their immediate experience in order to broaden their understanding of themselves, the world, and the possibilities for transforming the taken-for-granted assumptions about the way we live. (1989, p.186)

As Giroux acknowledges, education is a part of wider societal processes which reflect specific socio-economic arrangements that benefit some individuals and groups over others. Giroux's approach focuses on two broad interrelationships: 1) the political and ideological role of knowledge and how it is implicated in the social reproduction of society; 2) and the day-to-day educational practices and routines that generates meanings, values and social relationships. From this perspective, the focus shifts to questions such as:

* What counts as knowledge?

* How is such knowledge produced?

* How is such knowledge transmitted in the classroom?

* What kinds of classroom social relationships serve to parallel and reproduce the values and norms embodied in the "accepted" social relationships of the workplace?

* Who has access to "legitimate" forms of knowledge?

* Whose interests does this knowledge serve?

* How are social and political contradictions and tensions mediated through acceptable forms of knowledge and social relationships?

* How do prevailing methods of evaluation serve to legitimise existing forms of knowledge? (Giroux, 1981, 104).

Beyer summarises what it means to reject technological rationality in favour of a more socially critical approach to education in the following manner:

> A rejection of technological rationality thus carries with it both a humanising and democratising of knowledge and an individual and communal responsibility for action. In addition, a new approach to understanding must recognise the ways in which political, social, and ideological contexts are enmeshed with knowledge and action. Instead of pursuing knowledge 'for its sake', or for the cultivation of sensitivity, task, or cognitive discrimination it can encourage, it becomes valued for the actions and involvements it makes possible (1987, p.29).

Essential to this task is what Giroux and McLaren call the "intellectual work" of teachers'.

In their words, this means that teachers become:

> bearers of critical knowledge, rules and values through which they consciously articulate and problematize their relationship to each other, to students, to subject matter, and to the wider community. This view of authority exposes and challenges the dominant view of teachers as primarily technicians or public servants whose role is to implement rather than to conceptualise pedagogical practice. Moreover, the category of emancipatory authority dignifies teacher work by viewing it as an intellectual practice with respect to both its formal characteristics and the nature of the content discussed. Teacher work becomes a form of intellectual labor opposed to the pedagogical divisions between conception and practice, and production and implementation, that are currently celebrated in a number of educational reforms, The concept of teacher as intellectual carries with it the political and ethical imperative to judge, critique, and reject those approaches to authority that reinforce a technical and social division of labor that silences and disempowers both teachers and students (Giroux and McLaren, 1986, pp.225-226)

As Smyth reminds us, how we develop ways of asking and genuinely answering the question of "whose interests are served?, is one of the major issues confronting educational leaders today. For him, this means engaging in argument and debate about what is "socially just" in the way we structure education. It means asking questions like, how education works to:

* improve the life chances of the most disadvantaged in our community;

* create a voice for groups in the community that are generally marginalised or silenced;

* encourage teachers to celebrate difference and diversity in their teaching, learning and assessment practices, rather than conformity, compliance and control;

* provide the spaces in which teachers can genuinely construct curriculum that connects with the lives and experiences of their students, rather than to satisfying national curriculum linked to international economic competitiveness (1995a, p.66).

I would like to conclude by listing some of the practical guidelines suggested by Smyth fordeveloping a more "socially critical" approach to education like:

* A preparedness to endure discomfort.

* A willingness to try and change social relationships.

* Seeing how power operates in and through one's own pedagogy.

* Pursuing questions about whose interests are served/denied/silenced through particular

pedagogies.

* Questioning assumptions, beliefs and practices.

* Reconstructing practice on the basis of inquiry.

* Searching for the socially transformative potential in education.

* Asking questions about socially just nature of educational experiences.

* Adopting a process of simultaneously describing, informing, and confronting one's teaching and learning with a view to reconstructing it.

* Deconstructing hierarchies of authority, gender, racial and other forms of stereotyping.

* Looking at the familiar differently.

* Challenging conventional practices, ideas and ideals.

* Making the assumptions, practices and categories of everyday life problematic.

* Unmasking and unveiling hidden message systems in curriculum, pedagogy, evaluation and administration.

* Looking at circumstances and seeing how through dialogue and theorising about them they might be different.

* Understanding the oppressive and undemocratic features of education and how they came to be.

* Regarding the work of education as being historical, theoretical and political.

* Seeing teaching as a form of critical intellectual struggle (1995a, pp 67- 68)

Hargreaves succinctly articulates the way ahead when he says:

> The challenge of restructuring in education and elsewhere is a challenge of abandoning of attenuating bureaucratic controls, inflexible mandates, paternalistic forms of trust and quick fixes in order to hear, articulate and bring together the disparate voices of teachers and other educational partners. It is a challenge of building trust in the processes of collaboration, risk and continuous improvemnt as well as more traditional kinds of trust in people (1994, p.260)

**Implications for the future**

In developing educational guidelines and practices for the future, I think we need to do several things:

* Develop a shared understanding of the "new culture" among all participants (Fullan, 1991). This does not mean uniformity of views, but it should mean an informed acceptance of fundamental principles such as partnership, negotiation, and reflective practice. To develop these principles is to "reculture" learning contexts to create truly collaborative cultures among teachers and the wider community (Hargreaves, 1995; Smyth, 1995).

* More time and more flexible work organisation are needed to allow participants to discuss and negotiate the content, pedagogy and evaluation of their own learning. University staff, teachers, and administrators should have some ownership of its outcomes.

*Opportunities for critical reflection, analysis and action need to be built into educational programs for all participants, not just for the learners. We need to work together to create the conditions under which this critical intellectual work can be done, work which entails "moving outside the assumptions and practices of the existing order . . . (to make) categories, assumptions and practices of everyday life . . . problematic" (Popkewitz, 1987).

* Successful educational change requires a sense of what Hargreaves calls "positive politics" whereby power is used with other people rather than over them. This involves understanding the political configuration of learning contexts; acting politically to secure support and resources for the good of students; empowering others to be more competent; embracing conflict as a necessary part of change; and reclaiming the discourse of education (Hargreaves, 1995).

* The use of individual biographies is important in helping teachers and learners understand the complex historical, cultural and political forms that they embody and produce. These personal stories, according to Giroux, are attentive to the "histories, dreams and experiences" that students and teachers bring to school (1985, p.39). Significantly, they enable us to develop "a shared understanding of the social construction of reality" (Livingstone, 1987, p. 8).

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, I have argued that we need to challenge the theories, assumptions and practices that inform relationships between teachers and learners and education and society. Rather than reinforcing historically constructed practices we should begin to engage with the "intellectual work" of developing programs informed by "socially critical" views of education. Such an approach will be characterised by the principles of social justice, flexibility, diversity, responsiveness, collaboration, critique, and transformation. In my view, these ideas offer a more purposeful way of thinking about our work as educators, and at the same time responding to the complex demands produced by the post modern world.

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